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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN FACING DIRE FOOD INSECURITY

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11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified - Not for Internet Distribution.

12. (SBU) Summary: The food situation in Tajikistan remains precarious. The challenges the country has faced over the past year read like the Old Testament: after the worst winter in recent history, during which families faced acute shortages of food and fuel, a summer drought and a plague of locusts resulted in failed harvests. Then, just as the autumn rains brought some hope, the financial crisis hit, forcing layoffs of Tajik workers in Russia and declines in the remittances the country relies on to fund its imports. To top it all off, poor relations with Uzbekistan have held up critical energy imports, forcing most Tajiks to spend another winter in the dark. As a result of four successive seasons of misfortune, the country faces potentially critical shortages of food. A humanitarian crisis in Tajikistan, sitting on Afghanistan's northern border, could easily become a security crisis in Central Asia. End summary.

#### A Series of Misfortunes

12. (SBU) The poorest of the former Soviet republics, Tajikistan's development indicators languish near the bottom of international rankings. Its 1992-97 civil war slowed economic and democratic development and gave rise to a leadership obsessed with control and personal gain rather than economic diversification and general growth. A difficult situation has been made worse by a series of misfortunes beginning in winter of last year. With temperatures twenty or even thirty degrees below average, crops, stored food, and seeds were ruined. Many families faced serious difficulties finding adequate food and fuel. As prices for these commodities rose, rural Tajiks (the majority of the population) were forced to sell livestock and tools, and spend their meager savings or borrow heavily in order to survive. As a result, even after temperatures rose, many families remained acutely vulnerable because they had lost their capacity to endure further crises.

¶3. (SBU) The disastrous winter has had lingering consequences for agricultural production as well. The cold temperatures destroyed stocks of potatoes used for spring planting, resulting in lower yields this year. Prices of many commodities, such as wheat and cooking oil, rose sharply in response to the scarcity, and have not come down since. A severe drought in the summer, combined with a plague of locusts, further eroded Tajikistan's agricultural production, increasing food vulnerability.

¶4. (SBU) With only seven percent of its land arable, and the government stuck in a Soviet planned economy mindset that forces farmers to grow the USSR's preferred crop - cotton - Tajikistan has long been reliant on food imports. Last year's agricultural difficulties only increased this reliance. These difficulties were then further compounded by the onset of the world financial crisis. More than any other country in the world, Tajikistan is dependent upon remittances sent home from its citizens working outside the country. Almost every Tajik family has a relative working abroad, usually as an unskilled laborer in Russia, who sends back money the family uses to purchase critical commodities. Last year remittances were equivalent to 52% of the country's GDP, the highest ratio in the world. As a result of the financial crisis, however, many Tajik migrant workers have been losing their jobs. In January, for the first time in the six years records have been kept, remittance levels dropped from the same month the previous year. The layoffs actually present a double-edged problem: at the very same moment incomes are declining, Tajiks laid off from work abroad are returning home, resulting in more mouths to feed. The Food and Agriculture Organization identified Tajikistan as one of 17 countries in the world that is in a state of food crisis due to high prices. Lower incomes will only expand this problem.

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#### Challenges to Security and Stability

¶5. (SBU) Temperatures remained relatively warm this winter, somewhat mitigating the humanitarian impact of the global economic crisis. But the fact remains that many Tajiks are in dire straits. According to data from the World Bank, 53% of the population lives under the poverty line (defined as \$2.15 a day). The difficulties over the past year, combined with the ongoing financial crisis, means that many Tajik families simply cannot cope with additional hardships. Continued mismanagement of the agricultural sector, including heavy cultivation of cotton instead of food crops, means that the government's efforts hinder more than they help.

¶6. (SBU) A relatively small humanitarian crisis in Tajikistan has the potential to become a serious security problem for Central Asia. Food security is an emotionally charged issue, and the risk of instability rises as the large, suddenly unemployed male population in Tajikistan watches its children go hungry. Further, despite the efforts of Tajik and international law enforcement agencies, a considerable amount of opium already makes its way across Afghanistan's 1,344-km border with Tajikistan. Increasing poverty in Tajikistan could drive more Tajiks into the drug trade, helping to support insurgent elements in Afghanistan. Although Tajikistan's civil war ended over a decade ago, the regional divisions that expressed themselves in the conflict remain.

¶7. (SBU) Food insecurity and resulting malnutrition present serious and widespread health consequences. According to the World Bank, 27% of children under age 5 in Tajikistan are

"stunted," i.e., below average height for their age. This is the highest rate of stunting of any country of the region (the average for the Commonwealth of Independent States is 12% stunted). Food insecurity will damage Tajik society in the long term, reducing the human capacity of the state and private sector and making Tajikistan less developed and more vulnerable to drug trafficking, terrorism, and separatism.

#### Past Assistance Successful

¶8. (SBU) Since 2005, USAID has supported a Multi-Year food Assistance Program (MYAP) in Tajikistan. This \$26 million program ends in June, however, and is now in its final evaluation stages. The MYAP was particularly effective because it not only distributed food directly to beneficiaries but also sold a portion on the local market. The proceeds of this supported development programs that increased local agricultural production and other agribusiness activities, which in turn substantially relieved food insecurity in Tajikistan. MYAP participant households reported having two additional months of food in 2008, compared to the previous year. The MYAP achieved this by teaching new agricultural techniques, making improved seeds and tools available, and teaching families to preserve and save food more effectively. The MYAP program also resulted in positive social changes that will allow communities to accelerate and sustain their own development. By supporting a school feeding and health education program, MYAP increased school participation and sanitation. Training for rural women increased their status and rights within their own families and communities. The program notably improved the status and education of women in isolated and very conservative areas of Tajikistan which have experienced recent political instability.

¶9. (SBU) USAID provided two additional programs in response to last winter's humanitarian crisis. The first was a \$3.5 million Local Resource Procurement Program and the second was a \$5

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million Single Year food Assistance Program (SYAP). While neither of these programs is able to take the long-term approach that gave MYAP its development impact, both are providing immediate benefits to families with very few resources, and have built goodwill with participating communities.

... But They are Ending

¶10. (SBU) All food assistance is scheduled to cease by October 2009. This will mean that the most vulnerable families in Tajikistan will go without assistance precisely at the moment winter is approaching, and well before any conceivable economic recovery in Russia might reverse the painful reduction in remittances. Ending food assistance programs also means that our NGO partners will no longer be able to operate extensively in the field, limiting our ability to access accurate information on the humanitarian situation. The lead partner for the Food Assistance Consortium for Tajikistan, CARE International, has already decided to leave Tajikistan.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: In light of the challenges currently facing Tajikistan -- a disastrous winter, a summer drought, and the financial crisis -- now is a particularly inauspicious time to end food assistance in a strategically vital state neighboring Afghanistan. A new MYAP would be a particularly effective program, because it would allow us to supply food to those in

need while achieving a number of other long-term development goals. If a MYAP is not possible, we would recommend that the current SYAP be renewed and paired with other assistance to continue the agricultural, food preservation, health, and education components of MYAP. We should implement activities that generate income at the local level to help people earn enough money to buy the food that is available. We have an effective model to work from and are prepared to move quickly, but the window of opportunity to avoid a destabilizing food security crisis is closing quickly. End Comment.  
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